

R 120643Z DEC 08
FM AMEMBASSY TASHKENT
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 0093
INFO CIS COLLECTIVE
NATO EU COLLECTIVE
DIA WASHINGTON DC
NSC WASHINGTON DC
CIA WASHINGTON DC
USMISSION GENEVA
AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD
AMEMBASSY DHAKA
AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU
AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI
AMEMBASSY TASHKENT
USMISSION USOSCE
AMCONSUL ST PETERSBURG
AMCONSUL VLADIVOSTOK
AMCONSUL YEKATERINBURG
AMEMBASSY PODGORICA
SECDEF WASHDC 0022

C O N F I D E N T I A L TASHKENT 001454

DEPT FOR SCA AND DRL
AMEMBASSY BELGRADE PASS TO AMEMBASSY PODGORICA
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PASS TO AMCONSUL YEKATERINBURG
AMEMBASSY HELSINKI PASS TO AMCONSUL ST PETERSBURG
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PASS TO AMCONSUL VLADIVOSTOK

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [EAID](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [UZ](#)
SUBJECT: UZBEKISTAN: ATMOSPHERE SLOWLY IMPROVING FOR ACTIVISTS

REF: a) TASHKENT 924; TASHKENT 1197

CLASSIFIED BY: FITZMAURICE, RICHARD G; (B), (D)

11. (C) Summary: In the past weeks, independent human rights activists have held two human-rights related events attended by government officials. On November 28, the independent Ezgulik human rights group held a conference evaluating the government's recent legal reforms with several other independent human rights activists and a representative from the General Prosecutor's Office. One activist observed this was the first such conference held in Tashkent since the 2005 Andijon events, and the first he could remember attended by a government official. The conference organizers all have participated in "off-shore" training for Uzbek human rights activists conducted by Freedom House abroad. On December 5, an independent human rights activist and Embassy Democracy Commission grantee organized a human rights presentation attended by a Ministry of Education official and a representative of the state-controlled National Human Rights Center. The two events are evidence of a slowly improving atmosphere for independent human rights activists that have sought to build constructive relations with Uzbek officials. On the other hand, activists who continue to take a more confrontational stance towards the government - namely members of the Human Rights Alliance - continue to face problems and have little to show for their efforts. We believe that it is important to encourage further engagement between independent activists and the government, as we believe this has potential to improve human rights in Uzbekistan. End summary.

EZGULIK HOLDS HUMAN RIGHTS CONFERENCE IN TASHKENT...

12. (U) On November 28, DCM and poloff attended a human rights conference organized by Ezgulik, the only registered independent human rights group in Uzbekistan. Roughly 40 individuals attended the conference - including independent human rights activists, members of the Tashkent Bar Association, and a representative from the General Prosecutor's Office, which focused on the government's adoption and implementation of recent legal reforms. The presentations at the conference were substantive and objective, recognizing reforms taken by the government as well as criticism of their implementation. The conference began with an introduction by Ezgulik Chairwoman Vasila Inoyatova, followed by presentations by Rapid Reaction Group member Sukrob Ismoilov on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and its influence on the Uzbek Constitution and national laws; by Tashkent Bar Association Chairwoman Gulnora Ishkhanova on the adoption and implementation of the habeas corpus law; and by Mothers Against the Death Penalty and Torture Chairwoman Tamara Chikunova on the implementation of the government's decree abolishing the death penalty.

...FIRST SUCH CONFERENCE SINCE ANDIJON

13. (C) According to Jizzakh-based activist Bakthiyor Hamroyev, this was the first time since the 2005 Andijon events that an independent human rights group has been able to hold such a conference in Tashkent, and was the first that he could remember where a government official had attended. Hamroyev concluded that human rights groups in Uzbekistan should continue to seek constructive engagement with the government.

14. (C) Hamroyev's opinion was shared by the conference's main organizers. Chikunova noted that it was "only through dialogue that activists and the Uzbek government can understand each other."

Inoyatova observed that the conference demonstrated to the government that independent activists were not interested in "only throwing eggs," but sought constructive discussions on concrete issues. On December 2, Radio Free Europe's Ozodlik website carried an article penned by Inoyatova about the conference entitled "A Bridge Was Established."

SUBSTANTIVE PRESENTATIONS AND FRANK CRITICISMS

15. (U) Several participants offered frank criticism of the government during question and answer periods. For example, Botir Norbaev, a former member of Ezgulik now living in Kazakhstan, observed at one point that Uzbekistan is "ruled by one person" and questioned the efficacy of such conferences "if that person does not hear our criticisms." In response, Ismoilov answered that the organizers planned to widely distribute information about the conference, including to government contacts. Ismoilov also noted that the conference provided participants a rare opportunity for activists, independent journalists, and government officials to discuss their different points of view and to find common ground. He also asked that the conference "not turn into the usual 'blame game,' where independent activists simply hurl accusations at one another."

FREEDOM HOUSE'S INFLUENCE IS EVIDENT

16. (C) The main organizers and participants of Ezgulik's conference, including Inoyatova, Chikunova, Ismoilov, and Ishkhanova - all have participated in off-shore training for Uzbek human rights activists conducted by Freedom House in Turkey. The structure and content of the conference also appeared to be largely based on Freedom House's training, a session of which Poloff observed in July (ref A).

DEMCOM GRANTEE CONDUCTS HUMAN RIGHTS TRAININGS AT SCHOOLS

17. (U) On December 5, Poloff and information officer attended a presentation at a local school in Tashkent province celebrating the 60th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 16th Anniversary of the Uzbek Constitution (Note: Uzbekistan celebrated its Constitution Day on December 8. End note.) The presentation was the culmination of a semester-long series of human rights trainings conducted at the school by independent human rights activist Ulugbek Usmanov, who received an Embassy Democracy Commission grant for the project (ref B). Also in attendance were representatives from the local branch of the Ministry of Education and the state-controlled National Human Rights Center, which provided Usmanov with some of the materials he used to conduct his trainings. During the presentation, Usmanov also thanked the Embassy for its support. Usmanov conducted human rights trainings at a total of three different schools in Tashkent province this fall.

SKITS BRING UDHR ARTICLES TO LIFE IN THE UZBEK CONTEXT

18. (U) The presentation, which was largely carried out by the ninth grade students and teachers at the school, focused on specific articles from the UDHR covering political, civil, and economic rights. In addition, the students and teachers acted out several role-playing skits illustrating human rights violations, followed by explanations of why those violations contravened the UDHR and Uzbek law. Embassadors were impressed by the skits, which were both relevant to the Uzbek context and brought to life several of the UDHR's articles protecting political and civil liberties. The skits included a father asking his son to drop out of school to work to support his family, a group of women trying to convince a mother to let her 15-year old daughter marry one of their sons, and police arbitrarily searching a home and detaining its owner without due process.

IIP MATERIALS ON HUMAN RIGHTS DISTRIBUTED

19. (U) After the presentations, Embassadors distributed a new glossy IIP booklet on the 60th Anniversary of the UDHR. Poloff also made brief remarks commending the cooperation between Usmanov, the school, local officials, and the National Human Rights Center. He also noted Usmanov's receipt of an Embassy Democracy Commission grant and stated that the Embassy would continue to support such projects in the future.

HUMAN RIGHTS ALLIANCE MEMBERS FINED AFTER PICKET

10. (U) According to an article on the independent Ferghana.ru website, on December 6, activists from the Human Rights Alliance and the Prisoners of Conscience Committee were temporarily detained and fined after holding a "human rights parade" in front of the General Prosecutor's Office. A total of ten activists reportedly took part in the demonstrations, holding up signs calling for the release of political prisoners, including imprisoned political oppositionist and Sunshine Coalition founder Sanjar Umarov. The Human Rights Alliance, which receives most of its funding from the Sunshine Coalition and Umarov's family, has carried out several similar protests in front of the General Prosecutor's Office earlier this year, which have been frequently, but not always, broken up by police.

COMMENT

11. (C) For far too long, independent activists and government officials have viewed each as enemies, a view that only intensified after the 2005 Andijon events and the subsequent government crackdown on Uzbek civil society. Given the absolute lack of trust between activists and government officials, independent activists are not able to serve as effective mediators between ordinary citizens and the government. In fact, most human rights reporting in Uzbekistan focuses on the plight of the activists themselves, rather than the problems of ordinary citizens. In this sense, some activists in Uzbekistan have become as much the problem as the solution. Certain activists, including members of the Human Rights Alliance - which is largely financed by exiled members of the political opposition - continue to take an uncompromising stance towards the government and stage provocative actions which inevitably bring about a government backlash. Such actions are counterproductive and do little to advance human rights. On the other hand, another set of activists, including those who participated in Ezgulik's conference, have been seeking to engage government officials, build trust, and find common ground. We believe this approach is far more likely to positively influence human rights in the country, and we will continue to support such efforts. Ezgulik's conference represents a modest, but important step in the right direction, and the participation of the government shows that it has not completely shut the door to constructive engagement with independent activists.

12. (C) Prior to renewal of Freedom House's grant this past summer, the Embassy argued that Freedom House should strive to conduct more "on-shore" human rights activities in Uzbekistan. The Embassy feared that off-shore training by Freedom House and others tended to fuel the government's paranoia of the United States government funding "color revolutions." The Embassy also observed that human rights activists would be best positioned to effect positive change and assist ordinary citizens by building more constructive relations with government officials. The success of Ezgulik's conference demonstrates that it is slowly becoming possible for independent activists to carry out more "on-shore" human rights-related events in Uzbekistan. Freedom House's trainings also appear to have resulted in improved cooperation between independent human rights groups, who previously tended to criticize each other as much as they did the government. For example, when poloff first arrived at post in May 2007, Inoyatova and members of the Rapid Reaction Group were barely on speaking terms. Now, however, they appear to be working quite effectively together. Freedom House's efforts also appear to have built stronger relations between activists and reform-minded defense attorneys like Ishkhanova.

NORLAND

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